
Spatial Form in Modern Literature: An Essay in Three Parts

Author(s): Joseph Frank

Source: *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (Autumn, 1945), pp. 643-653

Published by: [Johns Hopkins University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27537640>

Accessed: 14-12-2015 08:22 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Sewanee Review*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

SPATIAL FORM IN MODERN LITERATURE

AN ESSAY IN THREE PARTS

BY JOSEPH FRANK

Part III

4

The true psychology of style begins when the formal value is shown to be an accurate expression of the inner value, in such a way that duality of form and content cease to exist.

—Wilhelm Worringer, *Form in Gothic*.

GRANTED that the works already considered are similar in their structure, that they all have in common the quality of spatial form, the question immediately arises: How can we account for this surprising unanimity? To answer this question satisfactorily, we must first widen the bounds of our analysis and consider the more general question of the relation of art forms to the cultural climates in which they are created. This latter question has attracted students of the fine arts at least since the time of Herder and Winckelmann; but it was not until the turn of the last century that a systematic study of the problem was begun. Stimulated by Hegel's masterly analysis of art styles as the sensuous objectification of various attitudes towards the universe, a group of German art-scholars and critics concentrated on the problem of form in the plastic arts, working out different categories of form, tracing in detail the shift from one type of form to another, and attempting to account for these changes in general cultural terms. T. E. Hulme, one of the few writers in English to have concerned himself seriously with these problems,

turned for guidance to this group of German scholars and critics; and we can do no better than to follow his example.

There is one writer in particular who exercised a strong influence on Hulme and, through Hulme by way of Eliot, possibly on the whole of modern English critical writing. This writer is Wilhelm Worringer, the author of a book entitled *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*—literally translated, *Abstraction and Empathy*—which is subtitled *A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*; and it is in Worringer's book that we shall find the key to our own problem of spatial form.⁵ Originally published in 1908, as its author's doctoral dissertation, the book went through numerous editions—a fact which, as Worringer claims in the preface to the third edition, proves that his subject was not merely academic but touched on problems vital to the modern sensibility. Another proof of this point, Worringer further remarks, is that, while he and other scholars were examining and re-evaluating neglected styles, creative artists were turning to these styles for inspiration, finding in them an esthetic form better adapted to the needs of their sensibility than the conventional naturalism of the nineteenth century. Although Worringer's work is impeccably scholastic, confining itself strictly to the past and excluding all but the briefest references to contemporary work, his claim is quite justified: a reader cannot help being struck by the relevance of Worringer's theories to the most fundamental problems of modern art. It is this relevance, along with a powerful and incisive style, which gives the book its notable atmosphere of intellectual excitement and discovery—an air which makes the reading of it, even today, an exhilarating experience.

In his book, Worringer proposes to explain why, throughout the history of the plastic arts, there has been a continual alternation between naturalistic and non-naturalistic styles. During periods of naturalism—the classical age of Greek sculpture and architecture, the Italian Renaissance, the art of Western Europe to the end of the nineteenth century—the artist strives to repre-

sent the objective, three-dimensional world of ordinary experience, and to reproduce with loving accuracy the processes of organic nature, among which man is included. On the other hand, during periods of non-naturalism—the art of primitive peoples, Egyptian monumental sculpture, Oriental art, Byzantine art, Gothic sculpture, the art of the twentieth century—the artist abandons the three-dimensional world and returns to the plane, reduces organic nature, including man, to linear-geometrical forms, and frequently abandons the organic world altogether for one of pure lines, forms and colors. While there are, of course, vast differences between the art-products of various periods lumped together under both these categories, the basic similarities between the works in one category, and their basic opposition, taken as a group, to all the works in the other category, are no less striking and instructive. We have here, according to Woringer, a fundamental polarity between two distinct methods of creation in the plastic arts; and neither can be set up as the norm to which the other must adhere.

From the Renaissance to the close of the nineteenth century, however, it was customary to accept naturalism, understood in this broad sense, as the standard for the plastic arts. Non-naturalism was looked upon as a barbarous aberration, whose cause could only be technical incapacity: it was inconceivable that artists should have violated the canons of naturalism if they had not been forced to do so by a low level of cultural development. Franz Wickhoff, a famous Austrian art-historian of the old school, called non-naturalistic art the “delightful stammering of children”; and this opinion, although it has lost all cogency with artists themselves, would probably find some acceptance among the educated public even at this late date. To combat this invidious elevation of naturalism as an eternal esthetic standard, Woringer makes use of the concept of *Kunstwollen*, or will-to-art, originally employed by another famous Austrian scholar, Alois Riegl. The impulse to creation in the plastic arts, Riegl

believed, was not primarily an urge towards the imitation of natural objects; for if this were true, esthetic value would be identical with skill in naturalistic reproduction, and the best works of art would be those which most skillfully duplicated the appearances of the natural world. Instead, Riegl postulated what he called an absolute will-to-art, or, better still, will-to-form; this absolute will-to-form is the element common to all activity in the plastic arts, but it cannot be identified with any particular style. All styles are, as a matter of fact, modifications of this absolute will-to-form as it finds expression in diverse fashions throughout the course of history. The importance of this concept, Worringer points out, is that it shifted the center of gravity in the study of styles from a purely mechanical causation—the state of technical artistic knowledge at the time the style flourished—to a cause based on the purposeful employment of the will-to-form. “The peculiarities of style in past eras,” Worringer writes, “can be traced back, not to any deficiency in knowledge, but to a differently directed will-to-art.” From this point of view it is impossible to regard non-naturalism as a grotesquely unsuccessful attempt to reproduce natural appearances: it has no interest in such reproduction, and cannot be judged as if it were attempting to compete with naturalism on its own terms. Both types of art, created to satisfy different spiritual needs, can only be understood if we examine the climates of feeling which have led to the predominance of the one or the other form at different times.

Once this conclusion is accepted, it is only a short step to the heart of Worringer’s book—his discussion of the spiritual conditions which have impelled the will-to-art to move either in the direction of naturalism or non-naturalism. When naturalism is the reigning art style, according to Worringer, we find that it is created by cultures which have achieved an equilibrium with the natural environment of which they are part. Like the Greeks of the classical period, they feel themselves part of organic nature, or, like modern man from the Renaissance to the close of

the nineteenth century, they are convinced of their ability to dominate the natural world. In either case, the organic world of nature holds no terrors for them: they have what Worringer calls a *Vertraulichkeitsverhältnis*—a relationship of confidence and intimacy—with the universe; and the result, in art, is a naturalism which delights in reproducing the forms and appearances of the objective, three-dimensional organic world. Following Riegl, however, Worringer warns us not to confuse this delight in the organic exhibited by naturalism with a mere impulse towards imitation. Although the imitation of natural forms and objects is a by-product of naturalism, what we enjoy is not the imitation *per se*, but our heightened sense of active participation in the organic which is brought about when we apprehend a naturalistic work of art; and it is this sense which, by demanding satisfaction, turns the will-to-art in the direction of naturalism when man and the universe are in harmonious relation.

On the other hand, when the relationship between man and the universe is one of disharmony and disequilibrium, we find that non-naturalistic, abstract styles are always produced. To primitive peoples the external world is an incomprehensible chaos, an utterly meaningless confusion of occurrences and sensations. Clearly, peoples at this level of cultural development would take no pleasure in an objective presentation of the organic: the world of their ordinary experience is a world of fear, and the representation of this world in art would merely intensify their terror. Their will-to-art, instead of turning towards naturalism, goes in the opposite direction: it reduces the appearances of the natural world to linear-geometrical forms—forms which have the stability, the harmony and the sense of order which primitive man cannot find in the flux of phenomena as, to quote Hart Crane, they “plunge in silence by.” Non-naturalistic styles are also produced, at a higher level of cultural development, in periods which, like the Byzantine and the Gothic, are dominated by a religion that completely rejects the natural world as a realm of

evil and imperfection. Instead of depicting natural appearances in all their overwhelming vitality, the will-to-art turns toward their spiritualization, towards the elimination of mass and corporeality, towards an approximation of the eternal ethereal tranquillity of other-worldly existence. In both cases—the primitive and the transcendental—the will-to-art, in conformity with the prevalent climate of feeling, diverges from naturalism to create esthetic forms that will satisfy the spiritual needs of their creators; and in both cases these forms are characterized by an emphasis on linear-geometrical patterns, on an elimination of objective, three-dimensional shapes and objective, three-dimensional space, on the dominance of the plane in all types of plastic art.⁶

It is a simple matter to apply Worringer's observations to modern developments in the plastic arts. At a time like the present, a time when, as the psychologist Erich Fromm has told us,⁷ man is trying to escape from freedom because he no longer feels able to cope with the bewildering complexities of megalopolitan existence, it should be no surprise that artists—always the most sensitive barometers of cultural change—have turned for inspiration to the styles of periods ruled by similar climates of feeling; and the results of this process on the plastic arts are too obvious to need any detailed comment. But, as T. E. Hulme was one of the first to realize, esthetic form in modern literature could be expected to undergo a similar change in response to the same climate of feeling; and Hulme's most interesting essay, "Romanticism and Classicism," is an attempt to define this change as it affected literary form. Unfortunately for Hulme's purpose, he lacked any adequate concept of esthetic form in literature, and he mistakenly tried to make up this deficiency by adopting ideas brought forth by the French critics Pierre Lasserre and Charles Maurras in their attack on Romanticism. For political as well as literary reasons these writers had bitterly criticized the French Romantics on every conceivable ground, much as Irving Babbitt was to do with Romanticism in general some years later; but what most impressed

Hulme in the writing of the French critics was their denunciation of romantic subjectivity, of the unrestrained emotionalism which the Romantics sometimes fobbed off as literature. Non-naturalistic art, Hulme had noticed, in its suppression of the organic also suppressed the subjective and the personal as modern man understood them; the corresponding style in literature would also be impersonal and objective, or at least would not be "like pouring a pot of treacle over the dinner table"; it would have a "dry hardness," the hardness of Pope and Horace, as against "the sloppiness which doesn't consider that a poem is a poem unless it is moaning or whining about something or other." And, Hulme concludes, "I prophecy that a period of dry, hard, classical verse is coming." Although this prophecy may seem to have struck remarkably close to home, from Hulme's own poems we know he was thinking of something resembling Imagism rather than the later influence of Donne and the Metaphysicals; but regardless of the accuracy of his prediction, his adoption of the classic-romantic antithesis could only confuse the issue. Instead of following Worringer's lead and attempting to work out some precise notion of the literary form that would parallel the changes taking place in modern art, Hulme gives us a vague description of this literary form as being "dry and hard" in quality, tacking this description on to a totally different set of problems by calling the form "classical" as well. Hulme's great merit lies in having been among the first to realize that literary form would undergo a change similar to changes in the plastic arts; but he failed to define this literary form with any exactitude. To do so, we must go back to Worringer and take up where Hulme's happy but fragmentary intuitions left off.

Because literature is a time-art, Hulme might have taken his point of departure, as we shall do, from Worringer's discussion of the disappearance of depth in non-naturalistic art. The general reasons for this development have already been explained; but Worringer analyzes this point with great particularity, and

in doing so throws out a remark of first importance for the understanding of spatial form in modern literature. "Space filled with atmospheric light," Worringer writes, "which binds objects together and cancels out their individual self-containedness, imparts a temporal value (*Zeitlichkeitswert*) to things, drawing them into the cosmic merry-go-round of appearances." Presenting objects in depth gives them a time-value, or perhaps we should say accentuates their time-value, because it connects them with the real world in which events occur; and since time is the very condition of that flux and change which, as we have seen, man wants to escape from when he is in a condition of disequilibrium with nature, non-naturalistic styles shun the dimension of depth and prefer the plane. How three-dimensionality accentuates time-value can also be understood from a purely perceptual point of view: the representation of objects in depth compels the eye to move backwards and forwards in order to grasp the relationship of objects to each other and to surrounding space; and this series of eye movements, taking place in time, lessens the spatiality of perception in a moment of time. Conversely, when depth disappears and objects are presented in one plane, their apprehension in a moment of time is obviously made easier. Although, to come back to Lessing, the plastic arts are absolutely spatial when compared to literature, we now see that they have been more or less spatial in the course of their inner evolution, depending on the extent to which the representation of three-dimensionality was favored or avoided. This means, paradoxically, that the plastic arts have been most spatial when they did not represent the space dimension and least spatial when they did, since a greater degree of time-value always accompanies the presentation of three-dimensionality.

In a non-naturalistic style, then, the inherent spatiality of the plastic arts is accentuated by the effort to remove all traces of time-value; and since modern art is non-naturalistic, we can say that it is moving in the direction of increased spatiality. The

significance of spatial form in modern literature now becomes clear: it is the exact complement in literature, on the plane of esthetic form, to the developments that have taken place in the plastic arts. Spatial form is the literary development that Hulme was looking for but did not know how to find. In both artistic mediums, one naturally spatial and the other naturally temporal, the evolution of esthetic form in the twentieth century has been absolutely identical: both have moved to overcome, so far as possible, the time-elements involved in their perception; and the reason for this identity is that both are rooted in the same spiritual and emotional climate—a climate which, as it affects the sensibility of all artists, must also affect the forms they create in every medium. On a purely formal plane, therefore, by demonstrating the complete congruity of esthetic form in modern art with the form of modern literature, we have laid bare what Worringer would call the “psychological” roots of spatial form in modern literature. But for a true psychology of style, as Worringer reminds us in the remarks quoted at the head of this section, the “formal value” must be shown “to be an accurate expression of the inner value, in such a way that duality of form and content cease to exist.” What elements can be discovered in the content of the works we have discussed that will resolve this duality?

In the case of Proust, we have already answered this question by showing that his use of spatial form arose from an attempt to communicate the extra-temporal quality of his revelatory moments. Ernst Robert Curtius, at the conclusion of his penetrating study of Proust, calls him a Platonist⁸; and this term is quite accurate if we take Curtius to mean that, like Plato, Proust found his ultimate value in an existence that had wrenched itself free from all submission to the flux of the temporal. Proust, it is not generally realized, was an ardent student of philosophy as well as a neurasthenic esthete⁹; and he was fully aware of the philosophic implications of his own literary productions. By conceptu-

alizing these implications for us in his analysis of the revelatory moment, Proust himself explained to the reader the unity between form and content in his masterwork.

With our other writers, however, the problem is a good deal more complex. Where Proust had been concerned with an individual revelation, restricted, in his work, to the sphere of the narrator's personal experience, the other writers all move out beyond the personal into the wider reaches of history: all deal, in one way or another, with the clash of historical perspectives induced by the identification of contemporary figures and events with various historical prototypes. This is evident in the *Cantos*, in *The Waste Land* and in *Ulysses*, for the chief source of meaning in all three is the sense of ironic dissimilarity and yet of profound human continuity between the modern protagonists and their long-dead exemplars. A similar palimpsest effect is found in *Nightwood*, where Dr. O'Connor is continually drawing on his "prehistoric memory" for images and metaphors, weaving the past in with the present and identifying the two. Allen Tate, speaking of the *Cantos*, writes that Ezra Pound's "powerful juxtapositions of the ancient, the Renaissance, and the modern worlds reduce all three elements to an unhistorical miscellany, timeless and without origin"; and this is called "the peculiarly modern quality of Mr. Pound." But it is, as well, the peculiarly modern quality of all the works we have before us—they all maintain a continual juxtaposition between aspects of the past and present, in such a way that both are fused in one comprehensive view; and as we have already pointed out, both Tiresias and Dr. O'Connor—the central figures of the works in which they appear—are the focus of consciousness in these works precisely because they transcend historical limits and encompass all times. (Leopold Bloom, of course, does the same thing; but Joyce, maintaining the traditions of naturalism, makes Bloom the unconscious bearer of his own immortality). By this juxtaposition of past and present, as Allen Tate realized, history becomes un-

historical: it is no longer seen as an objective, causal progression in time, with distinctly marked out differences between each period, but is sensed as a continuum in which distinctions between past and present are obliterated. Just as the dimension of depth has vanished from the plastic arts, so the dimension of depth has vanished from history as it forms the content of these works: past and present are seen spatially, locked in a timeless unity which, while it may accentuate surface differences, eliminates any feeling of historical sequence by the very act of juxtaposition. The objective historical imagination, on which modern man has prided himself, and which he has cultivated so carefully since the Renaissance, is transformed in these writers into the mythical imagination for which historical time does not exist—the imagination which sees the actions and events of a particular time merely as the bodying forth of eternal prototypes. These prototypes are created by transmuting the time-world of history into the timeless world of myth. And it is this timeless world of myth, forming the common content of modern literature, which finds its appropriate esthetic expression in spatial form.

[*The End*]

FOOTNOTES

⁶Although two of Worringer's books have been translated into English, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* can, unfortunately, be read only in German. However, the second section of Hulme's essay on "Modern Art," p. 82-91 of *Speculations*, is, as Hulme says, "practically an abstract of Worringer's views." These are the views presented in *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*.

⁷To forestall objections, it might be pointed out that neither Worringer nor the present writer regard these distinctions as absolute in any but a theoretical sense. These different styles are tendencies, which the art of various periods has approached in greater or lesser degree. Elements of both styles may be found in all periods: cultures are spoken of as creating one or the other style on the basis of predominance, not of absolute exclusion. The entire second portion of Worringer's book, which is outside the scope of our discussion, traces the actual degree of dominance and interpenetration of both styles in the plastic arts of selected cultures.

⁸*Escape from Freedom*, by Erich Fromm.

⁹*Französischer Geist im Neuen Europa*, von Ernst Robert Curtius, p. 130-145.

¹⁰See, for example, the comparison between Flaubert's handling of French grammar and Kant's categories and theories of perception in Proust's essay "A propos du 'style' de Flaubert." This essay is printed as an appendix in *Reflexions*, par Albert Thibaudet, Vol. 3, p. 249-263.